



*An invitation to a masked ball, where nothing  
is quite as it seems...*

I seldom attend parties unless I think they might be of use in my career, so it was all the more remarkable to find myself attending this one. This reticence is not due to shyness, you understand, nor to a lack of self-confidence – I value myself and my attainments rather highly. But I have always shunned larger gatherings – the chattering, lovely-to-see-you, how-are-you-my-dear, type of event. Loud music, brittle conversation, ladies air-kissing one another and then shredding each other’s reputations in corners. Not for me. My wife, however, has always enjoyed all and any parties with shrieking glee, telling people I am an old sobersides, and saying with a laugh that she makes up for my quietness.

But here I was, approaching the door of this house whose owners I did not know, and whose reasons for giving this party I could not, for the moment, recall.

It was rather a grand-looking house – there was an air of quiet elegance about it which pleased me. One is not a snob, but there are certain standards. I admit that my own house, bought a few years ago, is – well – modest, but I named it ‘Lodge House’ which I always felt conveyed an air of subdued grandeur. The edge of a former baronial estate, perhaps? That kind of thing, anyway. My wife, of course, never saw the point, and insisted on telling people that it was Number 78, halfway down the street, with a tube station just round the corner. I promise you, many is the time I have *winc*ed at hearing her say that.

This house did not appear to have a name or a number, or to need one. There was even a doorman who beckoned me in; he seemed so delighted to see me I felt it would be discourteous to retreat.

‘Dear me,’ I said, pausing on the threshold. I do not swear, and I do not approve of the modern habit of swearing, with teenagers effing and blinding as if it were a nervous tic, and even television programme-makers not deeming it always necessary to use the censoring bleep. So I said, ‘Dear me, I hadn’t realised this was a fancy-dress party. I am not really dressed for it—’ You might think, you who read this, that someone could have mentioned that aspect to me, but no one had.

‘Oh, the costume isn’t important,’ said the doorman at once. ‘People come as they are. You’ll do very nicely.’

He was right, of course. Dressed as I was, I should have done very nicely anywhere. I am fastidious about my appearance although my wife says I am pernicky. Downright vain, she says: everyone laughs at you for your old-fashioned finicking. I was wearing evening clothes – one of the modern dress shirts the young men affect, with one of those narrow bow ties that give a rather 1920s look, and I was pleased with my appearance. Even the slightly thin patch on the top of my head would not be noticeable in this light.

Once inside, the house was far bigger than I had realised; huge rooms opened one out of another and the concept put me in mind of something, although I could not quite pin down the memory. Some literary allusion, perhaps? It would be nice to think I had some arcane poet or philosopher in mind, but actually I believe I was thinking of Dr Who's *Tardis*. (Pretentious, that's what you are, my wife always says. We all have a good laugh at your pretensions behind your back.)

There were drinks and a buffet, all excellent, and the service— Well! You have perhaps been to those exclusive, expensive restaurants in your time? Or to one of the palatial gentlemen's clubs that can still be found in London if one knows where to look? Then you will have encountered that discreet deference. Food seemed almost to materialise at one's hand. I was given a glass of wine and a plate of smoked salmon sandwiches straight away and I retired with them to a corner, in order to observe the guests, hoping to see someone I knew.

The term 'fancy-dress' was not quite accurate after all, although a more bizarre collection of outfits would be hard to find anywhere. There was every imaginable garb, and every creed, colour, race, ethnic mix – every walk of society, every profession and calling. Try as I might I could see no familiar faces, and this may have been why, at that stage, I was diffident about



approaching anyone. It was not due to my inherent reticence, you understand: in the right surroundings I can be as convivial as the next man. This was more a feeling of exclusion. In the end, I moved to a bay window to observe, and to drink my wine – it was a vintage I should not have minded having in my own cellars. Well, I say *cellars*, but actually it's an under-stairs cupboard containing several wine-racks bought at our local DIY centre. It is not necessary to tell people this, however, and I always remonstrated with my wife when she did.



By an odd coincidence, the wine seemed to be the one I had poured for my wife quite recently, although I have to say good wine was always a bit of a waste on her because she never had any discrimination; she enjoys sugary pink concoctions with paper umbrellas and frosted rims to the glass. Actually, she once even attended some sort of all-female party dressed as a Piña Colada: the memory of that still makes me shudder and I shall refrain

from describing the outfit. (But I found out afterwards that Piña Colada translates, near enough, as strained pineapple, which seems to me very appropriate.)

But on that evening we had been preparing to depart for my office Christmas dinner, so I was hoping there would be no jazzily-coloured skirts or ridiculous head-dresses. It's a black tie affair, the office Christmas dinner, but when my wife came downstairs I was sorry to see that although she was more or less conventionally dressed, her outfit was cut extremely low and showed up the extra pounds she had accumulated. To be truthful, I would have preferred to go to the dinner without her, because she would drink too much and then *flaunt* herself at my colleagues all evening; they would leer and nudge one another and I should be curled with anger and embarrassment. Those of you who have never actually walked through a big office and heard people whispering, 'He's the one with the slutty wife,' can have no idea of the humiliation I have suffered. I remember attending a small cocktail party for the celebration of a colleague's retirement. Forty-three years he had been with the firm and I had been asked to make the presentation. A silver serving dish had been bought for him – I had chosen it myself and it was really a very nice thing indeed and a change from the usual clock. I had written a few words, touching on the man's long and honourable service, drawing subtle attention to my own involvement in his department.

You will perhaps understand my feelings when, on reaching the hotel, my wife removed her coat to display a scarlet dress that made her look – this is no exaggeration – like a Piccadilly tart. I was mortified, but there was nothing to be done other than make the best of things.

After my speech, I lost sight of her for a couple of hours, and when I next saw her, she was fawning (there is no other word for it), on the Chairman, her eyes glazed, her conversation gin-slurred. When she thanked him for the hospitality she had to make three attempts to pronounce the word, and by way of finale she recounted to four of the directors a joke in which the words *cock* and *tail* figured as part of the punch line.

The really infuriating thing is that until that night I had known – absolutely and surely *known!* – that I was in line to step up into the shoes of my retiring colleague. I had been passed over quite a number of times in the past, (I make this statement without the least shred of resentment, but people in offices can be very manipulative and the place was as full of intrigue as a Tudor court), but this time the word had definitely gone out that I was in line for his job. Departmental head, no less!

And what happened? After my wife's shameless display at the retirement cocktail party they announced the vacancy was to be given to a jumped-up young upstart, a pipsqueak

of a boy barely out of his twenties! I think I am entitled to have been upset about it. I think anyone would have been upset. *Upset*, did I say? Dammit, I was wracked with fury and a black and bitter bile scalded through my entire body. I thought – you lost that promotion for me, you bitch, but one day, my fine madam, one day...

Nevertheless, I still looked forward to that year's Christmas party. I had always counted the evening as something of a special event, so before we left, I poured two glasses of the claret I kept for our modest festivities, setting hers down on the low table by her chair. She did not drink it at once – that was unusual in itself and it should have alerted me, but it did not. I remember she got up to find my woollen scarf at my request, and then, having brought it for me, asked me to go upstairs for her evening bag. She knows I hate entering her over-scented, pink-flounced bedroom, but she sometimes tries to tempt me into it. I have learned to foil her over the years: the room makes my skin crawl and her physical importunities on those occasions make me feel positively ill. It was not always so, you understand. I fancy I have been as gallant as any man in my time.

So, the evening bag collected as hastily as possible, I sat down with my wine although it was not as good as it should be. There was a slight bitter taste – it reminded me of the almond icing on the Christmas cake in its tin – and I remember thinking I must certainly complain to the wine shop. I set down the glass, and then there was confusion – a dreadful wrenching pain and the feeling of plummeting down in a fast-moving lift... Bright lights and a long tunnel...

And then, you see, I found myself here, outside the big elegant mansion with the doorman inviting me in...

It was instantly obvious what had happened. The sly bitch had switched the glasses while I was getting her evening bag. She realised what I was doing – perhaps she saw me stir the prussic acid into her glass while she pretended to find my scarf, or perhaps she had simply decided to be rid of me anyway. But whichever it was, I drank from her glass and I died instead. The cheating, double-faced vixen actually killed me!

It seems this house is some sort of judgement place, for the doorman came back into the room a few moments ago and said, 'Murderers' judgements,' very loudly, exactly as if he was the lift-man at a department store saying, 'Ladies' underwear'.

Are these oddly-assorted people all murderers then? That saintly-looking old gentleman in the good suit, that kitten-faced girl who might have posed for a pre-Raphaelite painting? That middle-aged female who looks as if she would not have an interest beyond baking and knitting patterns...?

Having listened to fragments of their talk, I fear they are.

‘...and, do you know, if it had not been for the wretched office junior coming in at just that moment, I would have got away with it... But the stupid girl must go screaming off to Mr Bunstable in Accounts, and I ended in being convicted on the evidence of a seventeen-year-old child and the bought-ledger clerk... Twenty years I was given...’

‘Twenty years is nothing, old chap. I got Life – and that was in the days when Life meant Life...’

‘...*entirely* the auditor’s own fault to my way of thinking – if he hadn’t pried into that *very* small discrepancy in the clients’ account, I shouldn’t have needed to put the rat poison in his afternoon tea to shut him up...’

‘...I always made it a rule to use good old-fashioned Lysol or Jeyes’ Fluid to get all the blood off the knitting needle and they never got me, never even suspected... But that man over there by the door, he very stupidly cut costs: a cheap, supermarket-brand cleaner was what he used, and of course it simply wasn’t thorough enough and he ended his days in Wandsworth...’

‘...my dear, you should *never* have used your own kitchen knife, they were bound to trace it back to you... An axe, that’s what I always used, on the premise that you can put the killing down to a passing homicidal maniac – what? Oh, nonsense, there’s always a homicidal maniac somewhere – I’ve counted six of them here tonight as it happens – matter of fact I’ve just had a glass of wine with a couple of them... Charming fellows...’

Well, whatever they may be, these people, charming or not, *I’m* not one of them. *I’m* not a murderer. This is all a colossal mistake, and I have absolutely no business being here because I did *not* kill my wife. I suppose a purist might argue that I had the *intention* to kill her, but as far as I know, no one has yet been punished for that, although I believe the Roman Catholic Church regards the intention as almost tantamount to the actual deed—

And that’s another grievance! I may not actually have attended church service absolutely every Sunday, but I never missed Easter or Christmas. As a matter of fact, I rather enjoy the music one gets in a church. (Once I said this to my wife – hoping it might promote an interesting discussion, you know – but she only shrieked with laughter, asked if I was taking to religion, and recounted a coarse story about a vicar.)

But I have been a lifelong member of the Church of England and I should have thought as such I would have been taken to a more select division. However, there may be chance to point this out later. Presumably there will be some kind of overseer here.

It's unfortunate that for the moment I seem to be shut up with these people – with whom I have absolutely nothing in common. And all the while that bitch is alive in the world, flaunting her body, drinking sickly pink rubbish from champagne flutes. Taking lovers by the dozen, I shouldn't wonder, and living high on the hog from the insurance policies... Yes, that last one's a very painful thorn in the flesh, although I hadn't better use that expression when they come to talk to me, since any mention of thorns in the flesh may be considered something of a *bêtise* here. They'll have long memories, I daresay.



But I shall explain it all presently, of course. There's bound to be some kind of procedure for mistakes. I shall stand no nonsense from anyone, either. I did not kill my wife, and I'm damned if I'm going to be branded as a murderer.

I'm *damned* if I am...

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